

A Reevaluation of Pemberton at Vicksburg

**A Monograph
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AY 2012

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 03-04-2012		2. REPORT TYPE SAMS Monograph		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) JUN 2011-MAY 2012	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE A Reevaluation of Pemberton at Vicksburg				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Malcolm G. Haynes				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) School of Advanced Military Studies 250 Gibson Avenue Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301				8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT Historians have largely agreed that Pemberton should shoulder the blame for the poor Confederate performance during the Vicksburg campaign. General consensus exists among American Civil War historians that Pemberton proved a confused, indecisive, and incompetent commander and his poor leadership led to the Confederate defeat. However, an examination of the Vicksburg campaign conducted at the operational level of war shows that throughout the campaign, Pemberton led a capable and competent defense not just of Vicksburg, but of the Mississippi Department he commanded. He relied on an operational approach that involved fighting from prepared defensive positions in favorable terrain deep in his own territory and anchored by natural obstacles. To attack such a position, Pemberton knew an opponent would need a large force operating over an extended line of communications (LOC). Pemberton intended to interdict his opponent's LOC using a strong cavalry force, thus preventing the enemy from achieving the offensive momentum necessary to break through Vicksburg's defenses. This was a sound operational approach. However, it failed because of an ineffective Confederate command structure that, among other failures, denied Pemberton the resources, particularly adequate cavalry forces, required to implement his operational approach.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Vicksburg, Civil War, Pemberton, Grand Gulf, Port Gibson, Champion Hill, Indirect Approach, Grant, Johnston, Loring, Bowen, Gardner, Grierson, Stevenson, Chickasaw Bayou, Bruinsburg, Bluff river interface					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: Unclassified			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT (U)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 57	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Thomas C. Graves
a. REPORT (U)	b. ABSTRACT (U)	c. THIS PAGE (U)			19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code) 913-758-3302

SCHOOL OF ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES

MONOGRAPH APPROVAL

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A Reevaluation of Pemberton at Vicksburg

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Abstract

A Reevaluation of Pemberton at Vicksburg by MAJ Malcolm G. Haynes, US Army, 57 pages.

Historians have largely agreed that Pemberton should shoulder the blame for the poor Confederate performance during the Vicksburg campaign. General consensus exists among American Civil War historians that Pemberton proved a confused, indecisive, and incompetent commander and his poor leadership led to the Confederate defeat. However, an examination of the Vicksburg campaign conducted at the operational level of war shows that throughout the campaign, Pemberton led a capable and competent defense not just of Vicksburg, but of the Mississippi Department he commanded. He relied on an operational approach that involved fighting from prepared defensive positions in favorable terrain deep in his own territory and anchored by natural obstacles. To attack such a position, Pemberton knew an opponent would need a large force operating over an extended line of communications (LOC). Pemberton intended to interdict his opponent's LOC using a strong cavalry force, thus preventing the enemy from achieving the offensive momentum necessary to break through Vicksburg's defenses. This was a sound operational approach. However, it failed because of an ineffective Confederate command structure that, among other failures, denied Pemberton the resources, particularly adequate cavalry forces, required to implement his operational approach.

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Introduction

On July 4, 1863, underneath an old oak tree, Confederate General John C. Pemberton surrendered Vicksburg to General Ulysses S. Grant. Believed by many to be an impregnable fortress, the “Gibraltar of the Confederacy,” once besieged, had fallen in a matter of weeks. The defeat at Vicksburg remains a watershed moment in American history, propelling Grant to national fame and signaling the death knell of the Confederacy. Many military historians view the Vicksburg campaign as one of the most important in all of history.¹

J.F.C. Fuller, writing in 1956 after two world wars and the Korean War, called the Vicksburg campaign one of the most important ever fought by American combat forces.² The authors of the U.S. Army’s Field Manual (FM) of 1986 that earned fame as the “AirLand Battle” edition of *FM 100-5: Operations* called the Vicksburg campaign “the most brilliant campaign ever fought on American soil.”³ Students at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), the U.S. Army’s premier school for operational level planners, study Vicksburg in more detail than any other campaign because it provides students one of the first and best examples of operational art.

Operational art is “the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose” to achieve strategic objectives.⁴ In securing Vicksburg, Grant achieved several important Union strategic objectives. He kept the mid-western states that depended on Mississippi River commerce loyal to the Union. At the same time, he split the Confederacy in half, isolating the

¹ Michael L. Lanning, *The Battle 100: the Stories behind History’s Most Influential Battles* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003), 165-167.

² J.F.C. Fuller, *Decisive Battles of the USA, 1776-1918* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 258-288.

³ U.S. Army, *FM 100-5: Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1986), 91.

⁴ U.S. Army, *ADP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2011), 9.

western states from those to the east. Finally, because of its symbolic importance, the loss of Vicksburg dealt the Confederacy a devastating psychological blow. The manner in which Grant arranged his tactical engagements is just as impressive as the strategic outcomes.

Grant struggled for months to capture Vicksburg. His first attempt in November 1862, a two-pronged overland campaign, ended in failure. Throughout the winter of 1862, Grant tried a series of maneuvers to bypass Vicksburg or secure key terrain on one of Vicksburg's flanks. All these "Bayou Expeditions" failed. Finally, in April 1863, Grant launched a bold and risky plan. He maneuvered his forces to the south through eastern Louisiana, relying on a long and vulnerable line of communication (LOC). To divert Confederate attention and prevent them from attacking his vulnerable LOC, Grant launched a series of diversionary attacks – the most famous of which historians refer to as "Grierson's raid." Once Grant had maneuvered his forces south of Vicksburg, he crossed the Mississippi river at Bruinsburg and established a lodgment. In a break with standard practices, Grant then dispensed with a traditional LOC and foraged for sustenance as he outmaneuvered Confederate forces and cut Vicksburg's LOC at Jackson, Mississippi. He then defeated Confederate forces at the Battle of Champion Hill, causing a retreat into the Vicksburg garrison. Grant began siege operations, and after several weeks, realizing that relief was not coming, Pemberton surrendered.⁵

⁵ Michael B. Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened The Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

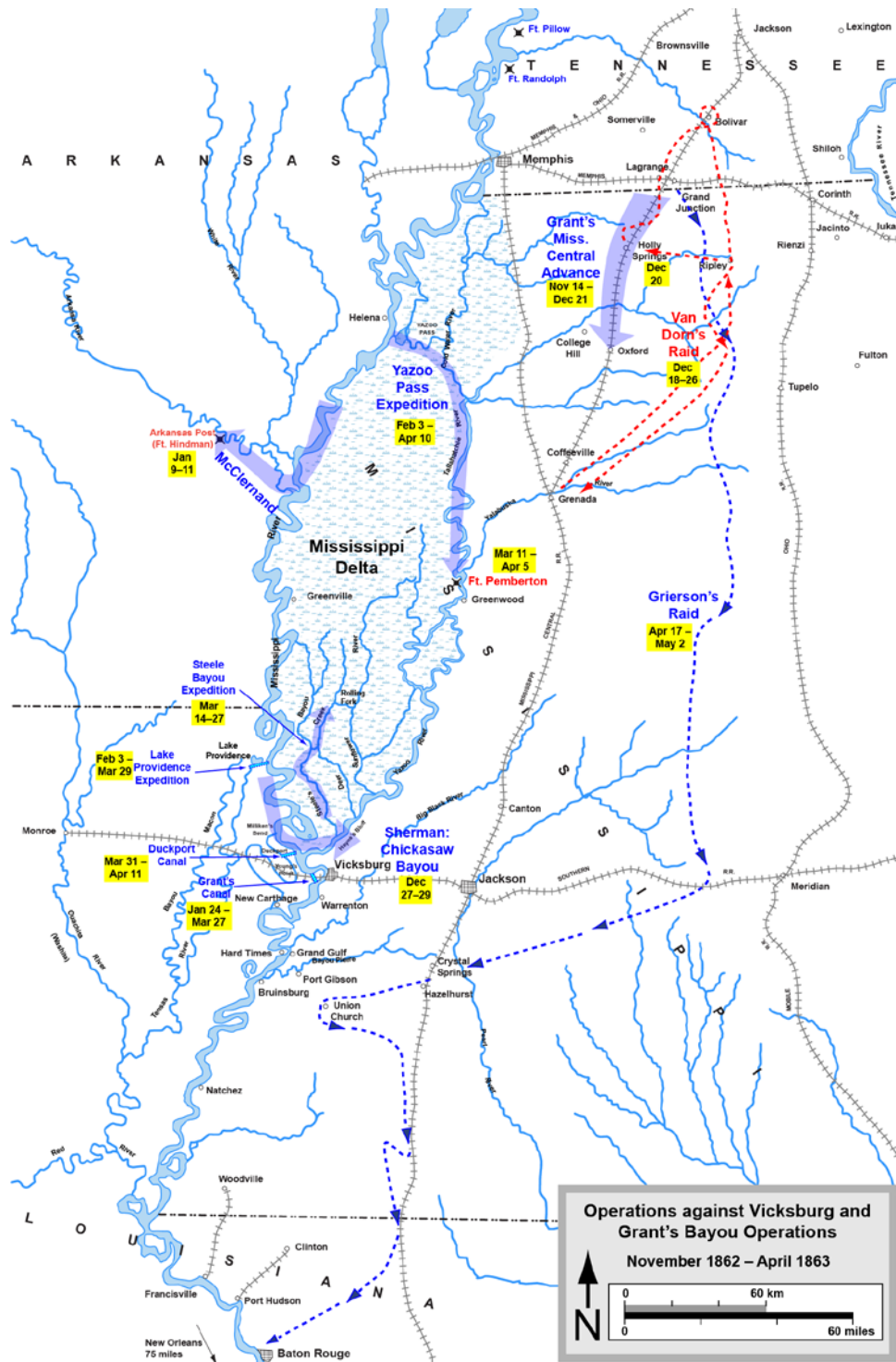


Figure 1 – Overview of Vicksburg Campaign (Nov 1862-April 1863)⁶

⁶ Hal Jespersen, "Hal Jespersen's Free Wikipedia Maps." *Cartography Services by Hal Jespersen*, <http://www.cwmaps.com/freemaps/VicksburgCampaignDecember62March63.png> (accessed April 1, 2012)

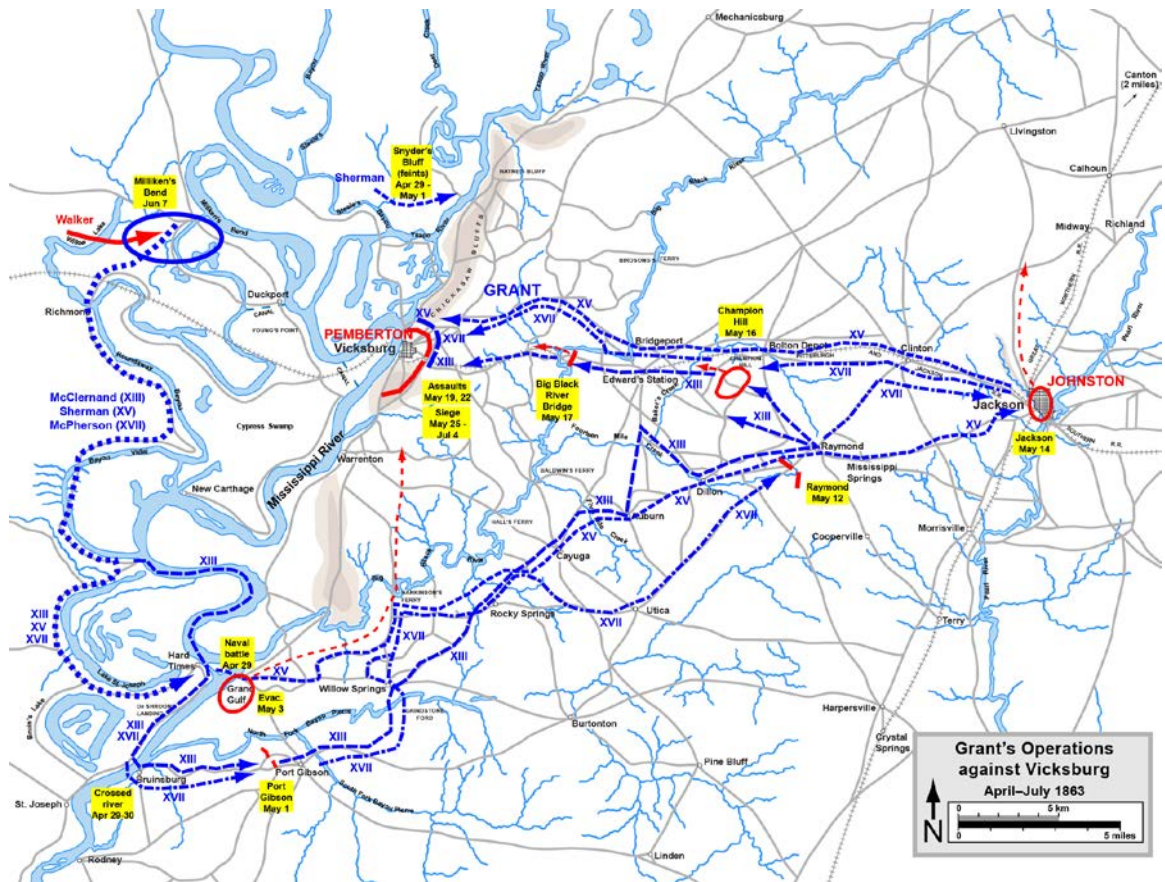


Figure 2 - Overview of Vicksburg Campaign (Apr-Jul 1863)⁷

Shortly after the ink dried on the surrender parchment, people within the Confederacy began to wonder how Vicksburg could have fallen. Fingers soon pointed at one man – John C. Pemberton. A northerner by birth, many southerners doubted Pemberton’s commitment to the Confederate cause and this made him an obvious scapegoat.⁸ Pemberton’s origins alone, however, cannot explain the conclusions of historians who, ever since the war, have largely agreed that Pemberton should shoulder the blame for the poor Confederate performance during the Vicksburg campaign. General consensus exists among American Civil War historians that

⁷ Hal Jespersen, “Hal Jespersen's Free Wikipedia Maps.” *Cartography Services by Hal Jespersen*, <http://www.cwmaps.com/freemaps/VicksburgCampaignAprilJuly63.png>

⁸ David M. Smith, *Compelled To Appear In Print* (Cincinnati: Ironclad Publishing, 1999), 59.

Pemberton proved a confused, indecisive, and incompetent commander and his poor leadership led to the Confederate defeat.

The traditional view of Pemberton tends to focus excessively on his tactical decisions and actions. Such analysis provides, at most, the proximate cause of defeat or, in many cases, simply an interesting battle narrative. The root cause of defeat in a military campaign usually lies at the operational level. Currently, the secondary literature on Vicksburg fails to provide an in-depth analysis of Pemberton as an operational commander.

An examination of the Vicksburg campaign conducted at the operational level of war shows that throughout the campaign, Pemberton led a capable and competent defense not just of Vicksburg, but of the Mississippi Department he commanded. He relied on an operational approach that involved fighting from prepared defensive positions in favorable terrain deep in his own territory and anchored by natural obstacles. To attack such a position, Pemberton knew an opponent would need a large force operating over an extended LOC. Pemberton intended to interdict his opponent's LOC(s) using a strong cavalry force, thus preventing the enemy from achieving the offensive momentum necessary to break through Vicksburg's defenses. This was a sound operational approach. However, it failed because of an ineffective Confederate command structure that, among other failures, denied Pemberton the resources, particularly adequate cavalry forces, required to implement his operational approach. Samuel Smiles said that, "We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success. We often discover what will do, by finding out what will not do."⁹ Studying the failure of John C. Pemberton at Vicksburg may help prevent similar failures in the future.

⁹ Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 349.

Literature Review

Pemberton's immediate superior during the Vicksburg campaign, General Joseph E. Johnston, did the most to establish the historical narrative of Pemberton's incompetence. Less than a month after the fall of Vicksburg, Johnston had a subordinate submit a letter for publication in national newspapers that sought to absolve Johnston of any wrongdoing at Vicksburg and place the blame for defeat on Pemberton. After the war ended, Johnston published a memoir of his experiences during the war. In his *Narrative of Military Operations During the Civil War*, Johnston faults Pemberton for placing undo importance on Vicksburg, failing to concentrate his forces against Grant, and disobeying orders. While Johnston's memoir is very much a self-serving defense of his own actions during the war, in firing the first shot he established the lens through which most subsequent commentators have viewed Pemberton.¹⁰

Johnston's criticisms of Pemberton do not match the account of the campaign in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, commonly referred to as the OR. The OR contains field reports, correspondence, and records kept by both sides during the war. The reports and exchanges in the OR indicate acceptance within the Confederacy that Pemberton's actions were suitable responses to the challenges he faced. In fact, on May 8, well into the final phase of the Vicksburg campaign, Johnston wrote to Pemberton that, "I never thought of expressing censure of you in any dispatches."¹¹

In 1942, Pemberton's grandson, John C. Pemberton III attempted to restore his grandfather's reputation. He released a biography on Pemberton entitled *Pemberton: Defender of*

¹⁰ Smith, *Compelled to Appear in Print*, 68-69; General Joseph E. Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations During the Civil War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959), 170, 186-189; David M. Smith, "They Didn't Like Each Other Much: Johnston and Pemberton at Vicksburg." *Cincinnati Civil War Round Table*, September 19, 1996, http://www.cincinnatiwrt.org/data/ccwrt_history/talks_text/smith_johnston_pemberton.html (accessed February 18, 2012).

¹¹ *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Volume XXIV (Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1880-1901), 844.

Vicksburg. As the familial relationship and title suggest, the book is a defense of Pemberton. Unsurprisingly, the work concludes, “the Confederacy has not a truer, more gallant, and few more gifted soldiers [than Pemberton], and . . . no officer was ever more shamefully and unjustly censured.” This work did little to rehabilitate Pemberton; few in the community of historians take it seriously. In fact, the *Staff Ride Handbook for the Vicksburg Campaign* states that the work “should be avoided.”¹²

Acclaimed Vicksburg historians such as Bruce Catton and Ed Bearss have also ignored *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg* in reaching their own conclusions about Pemberton. Catton, in his 1960 work *Grant Moves South*, ranks among the first of many historians to describe Pemberton as perplexed by Grant’s actions. In *Grant Strikes a Fatal Blow*, published in 1986, Bearss builds on Catton’s work by describing Pemberton as indecisive, arguing that Pemberton procrastinated inexplicably before making decisions. Although other historians continued to add to the body of work about Vicksburg and to the criticisms of Pemberton, no trained historian published a biography about him until 1991 when Michael Ballard’s *Pemberton: A Biography* appeared.¹³

Ballard’s biography, reprinted in 1999 as *Pemberton: The General Who Lost Vicksburg*, is very critical of Pemberton as a military commander.¹⁴ Ballard describes Pemberton as an able administrator but an unfit commander, arguing that Pemberton lost his confidence during his tenure as a department commander in South Carolina. Thereafter, when presented with a difficult

¹² John C. Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 253; Christopher R. Gabel and the Staff Ride Team, *Staff Ride Handbook for The Vicksburg Campaign, December 1862-July 1863* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2001), 223.

¹³ Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 436-437; Edwin C. Bearss, *Grant Strikes a Fatal Blow* (Dayton: Morningside, 1986), 99; Michael B. Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991).

¹⁴ Michael B. Ballard, *Pemberton: The General Who Lost Vicksburg* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

challenge, Ballard claims Pemberton became “tentative, uncertain, and slow to react.” Thus, he provides a rationale for the themes articulated by earlier writers.¹⁵

After Ballard’s work first appeared in 1991, many other historians, while not writing specifically about Pemberton, have criticized Pemberton’s leadership during the Vicksburg campaign. Philip Tucker in his biography of John S. Bowen repeatedly accuses Pemberton of “chronic indecisiveness” as well as a lack of insight, imagination, and combat experience. David Martin in *The Vicksburg Campaign* states that Pemberton was “confused about Grant’s intentions.” James Arnold in *Grant Wins the War* reports that Pemberton was incompetent and oblivious to obvious threats. Many other works present similar judgments.¹⁶

Pemberton himself was silent until 1999 when he posthumously defended his actions with the release of *Compelled to Appear in Print* by David M. Smith. Discovered in a flea market in Cincinnati, Pemberton’s previously unpublished response to Johnston’s memoir provides a counter argument to the traditional narrative. Pemberton addresses and refutes each of the major criticisms Johnston raised in his memoir. However, this work has done little to alter the historical consensus on Pemberton.¹⁷

Although few in number, some works do provide a more balanced view of Pemberton. For example, Warren Grabau’s *Ninety-Eight Days*, published in 2000, analyzes the Vicksburg campaign by bouncing back and forth between Federal and Confederate perspectives of the war during several discrete periods. This dual-perspective approach yields a more evenhanded

¹⁵ Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 134.

¹⁶ Phillip T. Tucker, *The Forgotten “Stonewall of the West”: Major General John Stevens Bowen* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 191, 199, 200; David G. Martin, *The Vicksburg Campaign: April 1862-July 1863, Revised and Expanded* (Conshohocken: Combined Books, 1994), 102; James R. Arnold, *Grant Wins the War: Decision at Vicksburg* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 146-147.

¹⁷ Smith, *Compelled to Appear in Print*, VII.

treatment of Pemberton. Interestingly, unlike most of his predecessors, Grabau finds much fault with Confederate Generals William Loring and Joe Johnston in his work.¹⁸

Collectively, the literature fails to examine Pemberton as an operational commander. None of the secondary works analyzes Pemberton's overall approach to the defense of Vicksburg or explains why his approach ultimately failed despite successfully thwarting Grant's efforts for several months. None examines the impact of operational decisions outside Pemberton's control on the conduct of the campaign. Finally, none provides an objective assessment of the impact of strategic decisions and lack of strategic support on Pemberton's ability to carry out his campaign plan.

Methodology

Historian John Lewis Gaddis proposes that the intersection of continuities and contingencies make history. He goes on to define continuity as a pattern that extends across time whereas contingencies represent breaks in historical patterns. Continuities are important because identification of historical patterns helps explain what happened in the past, and provides a hint regarding what might happen in the future. Gaddis also recognizes that one of the tools of a historian is the ability to shift scale "from the macroscopic to the microscopic, and back again." A smaller event sometimes effectively characterizes one much larger. Examining Pemberton using continuities and contingencies and shifting the scale of analysis reveals operational themes that appear throughout the Vicksburg campaign.¹⁹

The first relevant themes regarding Pemberton's performance at Vicksburg appear in analysis of his early military career. Of particular interest are Pemberton's experiences as a department commander in South Carolina. Examining Pemberton's past should reveal

¹⁸ Warren E. Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days: A Geographer's View of the Vicksburg Campaign* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 302-304.

¹⁹ John L. Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25, 30-31.

continuities, such as incompetence or indecision that, if present in his previous military experiences, would reveal patterns that contributed to his defeat at Vicksburg. Likewise, his previous competence conducting operational art should serve as a relevant indicator regarding his future performance. Analysis of Pemberton's past also provides the framework for identifying historical contingencies, or unique events, that suggest an alternate narrative for the defeat at Vicksburg.

Detailed assessment of one such contingent event, Grant's crossing of the Mississippi River, a decisive point in the Vicksburg campaign, provides the themes for an alternate explanation of defeat.²⁰ In short, Pemberton was a competent department commander prepared to defend Vicksburg from conventional attack routes. However, Grant's desperation resulted in a line of operations that no one expected. This military gamble, in turn, exposed the root cause of Confederate defeat – an ineffective Confederate command structure and equally ineffective allocation of resources that prevented Pemberton from anticipating or countering this maneuver effectively.

A broad assessment of the campaign after the Battle of Port Gibson supports this explanation. After Port Gibson, Pemberton desired to fight Grant along the Big Black River from prepared defensive positions in favorable terrain. However, ordered to abandon his positions, Pemberton ended up fighting a meeting engagement he never intended at Champion Hill, considered by many to be the decisive battle of the campaign. Defeat at Champion Hill caused Pemberton to withdraw to Vicksburg. The subsequent siege of Vicksburg is a testament to the combined misuse of resources and an ineffective Confederate command structure.

²⁰ A decisive point is "a geographic place, specific key event, critical system or function that allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an enemy and greatly influence the outcome of an attack." (FM 1-02: Operational Terms and Graphics)

Pemberton's Early Military Career

Armed with a presidential nomination from his father's friend, Andrew Jackson, John Clifford Pemberton joined the United States Military Academy (USMA) class of 1837. Pemberton was an average student, finishing 27th in his class of 50 cadets. However, Pemberton loved his time at the Academy. He was very social and his energetic antics won him the friendship of many other cadets. Upon graduation in 1837, Pemberton commissioned as an artillery officer and soon deployed with his new unit to Florida to participate in the Seminole Wars.²¹

On January 24, 1838, Pemberton saw action in south Florida, participating in a battle against a band of Seminoles in Loxahatchee. Later that summer, his unit deployed to North Carolina, where they participated in operations to find Cherokee Indians who were hiding and refusing to move west. Pemberton later participated in border duty during the bloodless Aroostook War over the United States' border with Canada. Afterwards, his unit returned to Florida, where Pemberton assumed command of the ordnance depot at Saint Augustine. From 1840-1845, his unit moved several times, serving in Detroit, Michigan; Buffalo, New York; Fort Monroe, Virginia; and Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. Pemberton was promoted to first lieutenant on March 19, 1842.²²

Although Pemberton saw action against the Seminoles, this experience in irregular war did little to prepare him for the conventional fighting he encountered in the Civil War. In 1845, Pemberton's unit transferred to Texas. There he waited for war with Mexico, which started in 1846. Pemberton's experiences during the Mexican American War from 1846 to 1848 proved far

²¹ West Point Association of Graduates website, <http://www.westpointaog.org/page.aspx?pid=1868> (accessed February 18, 2012); Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 24.

²² Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 28, 30-31, 36-40.

more useful in preparing him for his later experiences in senior command during the American Civil War.

During the Mexican War, at the Battle of Resaca de la Palma, Pemberton took temporary command of an infantry company, and participated in the most intense fighting on the battlefield. In fact, a bullet passed through Pemberton's hat, and six men died near where he stood. During the battle, Pemberton performed so well that he attracted the eye of General William Worth who selected Pemberton to serve as his aide-de-camp.²³ While serving as General Worth's aide during battle against Mexicans in Monterrey, Pemberton received a brevet promotion to captain for gallant conduct. When General Winfield Scott opened a second front at Veracruz, Pemberton's unit transferred to Scott's army. He then participated in the Mexico City campaign, receiving a brevet promotion to major for gallantry.²⁴

Thus, through two wars, Pemberton showed none of the incompetence or indecisiveness that later historians claimed he exhibited in combat. In fact, enthusiasm for battle, gallantry, and a stiff sense of honor seem to characterize Pemberton throughout his pre-Civil War career. In addition, as aide-de-camp to General Worth, one of the most respected generals serving in the U.S. Army during the Mexican-American War, Pemberton served in a unique position that offered a junior officer useful insight regarding leadership as a senior officer in combat. Pemberton saw war from a general officer's perspective, witnessing firsthand how Generals Worth and Scott used operational art to achieve success in Mexico. Pemberton served, however, as a company grade officer in these conflicts. His first experience as a general officer in the early years of the Civil War should provide a better indication of his likely future performance as a senior officer in that conflict.

²³ Ibid., 49-50.

²⁴ Ibid., 61; Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg*, 13, 15.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Pemberton resigned his commission and joined the Confederate Army. In an interesting twist of fate, at the request of Joseph E. Johnston, Pemberton received a commission as a lieutenant colonel of Virginia state volunteers and an assignment to build a basic training camp for artillery and cavalry. Pemberton soon rapidly advanced in rank in both the state militia and the Confederate Army, receiving two promotions in two months to achieve the rank of brigadier general in the Confederate Army.²⁵

Pemberton's rapid advance has drawn mention by historians. Michael Ballard states that, "There is no clear answer why Pemberton moved up in rank so fast." Such statements fail to consider the fact that, in 1861, Pemberton had 24 years of experience as an Army officer. By 1850, he was one of only fifty captains on active duty. The huge increase in the size of the Union and Confederate militaries would cause officers on both sides to rapidly advance in rank. For example, Pemberton's rise is not so different from the advancement of Ulysses S. Grant, who returned to active duty after seventeen years out of the service, starting his Civil War career as a colonel and regimental commander. Similarly, Pemberton's friend from USMA, George Meade, rose from captain to brigadier general in only two months. With his increased rank, Pemberton received assignment to work for Robert E. Lee in South Carolina as an assistant department commander.²⁶

Pemberton learned much from Lee's approach to defending South Carolina. Lee decided to shut down minor outlying positions and strengthen the more important interior positions in Charleston and Savannah. He built his defensive line inland, out of range of enemy gunboats while retaining the ability to defend vital railroads. Clearly, Lee had a particular vision of how a campaign to defend South Carolina and Georgia would unfold. With this in mind, Lee chose the

²⁵ Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg*, 26.

²⁶ Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 86-87. Similar rapid increases in rank have occurred in most American conflicts, due to the rapid expansion of the nation's habitually small peacetime Army.

locations for expected battles and prepared defenses all in order to deal a series of defeats to Union forces and deny them strategic Confederate territory. Thus, by observing Lee's combat leadership and decision-making, Pemberton received a perspective on defensive operational art. Events would soon show Pemberton the validity of Lee's defensive concepts.²⁷

On New Year's Day 1862, Pemberton and his men mounted a successful defense against a Union attack up the Coosaw River. Although victorious, Pemberton discovered that heavy gunboat fire made his defense extremely difficult and that enemy gunboats were able to silence his guns. This event and several other skirmishes convinced Pemberton of the ineffectiveness of trying to stop gunboats with outlying forts and batteries.²⁸ These events thus informed his concept of how to arrange defensive battles, particularly when facing a joint land and naval force.

In March 1862, the Confederacy reassigned General Lee, and Pemberton took over command of the Department of South Carolina and Georgia. Pemberton began experiencing problems immediately. He was chronically short of funds and often forced to choose between paying his men and purchasing supplies. Moreover, he faced a severe lack of manpower and resorted to impressing slave labor, which strained relations with South Carolinians. To make matters worse, Pemberton's army slowly drained away, with units siphoned off to reconstitute forces decimated at the Battle of Shiloh. By July, Pemberton's army had decreased by twenty percent, from 23,000 to 18,700, yet he still had to defend the extended South Carolina and Georgia coastline. This shortage of troops forced Pemberton to constrict his defenses, but his decision to abandon several outlying defensive positions led to protests from South Carolina citizens.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 88.

²⁸ Ibid., 88.

²⁹ Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg*, 28; Ballard, *Pemberton*, 90-94.

Tactically, the decision to abandon the extended defenses allowed Pemberton to shorten his defensive line, strengthening his overall position. However, Pemberton failed to communicate effectively the reasons for this decision to the state's political leadership, who doubted Pemberton's commitment to hold key cities such as Charleston. When pressed on the issue, Pemberton indicated that he would not necessarily fight for the city at the cost of putting his overall defensive strategy at risk. Historians often highlight the resulting outcry as a statement regarding Pemberton's leadership, but it actually says more about the Confederacy's failure to build consensus around a strategy for fighting the war. Some Confederate leaders argued they must hold key cities at all cost. Others thought maintaining an Army-in-being was more important.³⁰

After Pemberton constricted his defensive line, the South Carolina governor began lobbying heavily to have Pemberton replaced. Ultimately, Confederate President Jefferson Davis reassigned Pemberton to command the Department of Mississippi, replacing him in South Carolina with General P.T. Beauregard.³¹ Although Davis moved Pemberton, it was for political, not professional, reasons. Simply put, Pemberton's defensive concepts, though militarily sound, were politically unacceptable to the people of South Carolina. There is no indication that Pemberton's strategy was unreasonable or that he was incompetent, confused, or indecisive. In fact, General Samuel Cooper, the senior ranking officer in the Confederacy concluded that Pemberton was doing "all that a zealous, active, and intelligent officer could do with the means at his command."³²

Upon his departure, Pemberton also received praise for his efforts in South Carolina from several sources. For example, two newspapers in South Carolina wrote glowing editorials. The

³⁰ Ballard, *Pemberton*, 92-93, 99, 102-103, 107; *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Volume XIV, 569-570.

³¹ Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg*, 28-29, 34-35.

³² *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XIV, 569-570; Ballard, *Pemberton*, 108.

Courier wrote that Pemberton's "efforts and orders and plans have been too often counteracted by ignorance or prejudice, or by vacillation on the part of those who could and should have aided him" and that despite this hindrance Pemberton had "done much and done well." The *Mercury* wrote that, amongst other favorable traits, Pemberton's "keenness of perception, quickness of thought, and promptness of action" would serve him well in future assignments. Also, a year later Pemberton received a letter from Colonel A. J. Gonzales, a former subordinate with apparently nothing to gain, indicating that Charleston still stood largely as a result of Pemberton's efforts to strengthen interior positions. In contrast, federal gunboats had destroyed Fort Sumter, an outlying position conventional wisdom thought was essential to the security of South Carolina.³³

Thus, Pemberton showed no signs of incompetence, confusion, or indecision during his tenure in South Carolina. In fact, the opposite seems true. Pemberton received praise for being decisive and quick to act. He pursued a logical defensive plan with great energy even in the face of significant political opposition and vague strategic guidance. This behavior is consistent with the character traits Pemberton exhibited in his early military career.

Pemberton matured as an operational leader in South Carolina. He learned the need for good communication with civilian leaders and developed his ideas on defensive operations. However, the Union never launched a major attack on South Carolina during Pemberton's tenure. Hence, those first months at Vicksburg, the time closest to Pemberton's defeat, should yield the most relevant insight into Pemberton's capability as an operational commander.

On October 1, 1862, Pemberton assumed command of the Department of Mississippi, which included all of Mississippi and that portion of Louisiana east of the Mississippi River.³⁴ Upon his arrival on October 9, Pemberton found a department in disarray. The Army of Northern Mississippi had recently been defeated at Corinth and, in the words of Pemberton's adjutant, R.

³³ Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg*, 36-37; Ballard, *Pemberton*, 111-112.

³⁴ Ballard, *Pemberton*, 114.

W. Memminger, “the whole department was one Chaos.”³⁵ Pemberton immediately set to work. He focused on rebuilding the morale of the men and reconstituting the army.³⁶ Realizing the importance of Port Hudson, he began extensively fortifying it. Then, after finding the logistical system unsustainable, Pemberton set about solving that problem. Furthermore, having learned from his South Carolina experience, Pemberton immediately took steps to establish a positive relationship with the governor of Mississippi. The locals quickly recognized Pemberton’s efforts, and a reporter for the Jackson newspaper declared that Pemberton was doing “all that mortal man can do, with the means at his disposal.”³⁷ As he had so often in the past, Pemberton attacked his current problem decisively and energetically. However, he still had not faced a major military offensive – a threat that, unknown to him at the time, loomed on the horizon.

In late November 1862, Grant attacked Vicksburg with a two-pronged overland assault. As Grant attacked by land from the north, General William T. Sherman moved his corps down the Mississippi River and attacked from the west. Pemberton deftly thwarted Grant’s attack by ordering a cavalry raid, which destroyed Grant’s supply depot at Holly Springs. Unable to supply his troops, Grant had little choice but to return to Memphis. Pemberton then rapidly positioned forces on bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River and repulsed Sherman’s attack at the Battle of Chickasaw Bayou. Pemberton had defeated a numerically superior foe through the combination of bold cavalry action and defending in favorable terrain.³⁸

After Holly Springs, Grant moved his army to eastern Louisiana on the west side of the Mississippi River where he launched a series of five offensive operations collectively known as

³⁵ R. W. Memminger, “The Surrender of Vicksburg – A Defence of General Pemberton” *Southern Historical Society Papers, Volume XII (July-August-September), 1884: 352-360*, <http://mobile96.com/cw1/Vicksburg/GH/Vicks-Surrender.html>, accessed December 21, 2011.

³⁶ Ballard, *Pemberton*, 121.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 116; *Jackson Daily Mississippian*, November 28, 1862.

³⁸ Martin, 69-80; Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 121-146; Ballard, *Pemberton*, 129; Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg*, 62-72; Ballard lists Grant’s combined force at 60,000 while Pemberton’s force is numbered at 22,000.

the Bayou Expeditions. However, all five failed. The first, an attempted canal across De Soto's Point to bypass Vicksburg, failed due to Pemberton's use of artillery to prevent dredging. The second was impractical for engineering reasons. The third attempt, known as the Yazoo Pass Expedition, failed when Pemberton built Fort Pemberton and assigned General William W. Loring to defend the Yazoo River. The next attempt, the Steele's Bayou Expedition, failed in an almost spectacular manner, ending with the near capture of Union Admiral Porter and his squadron of gunboats. Grant abandoned his last attempt, the Duckport Canal, due to declining water levels in the Mississippi River.³⁹ Despite this series of failures, the fact that Grant's base of operations was west of the Mississippi River created problems for Pemberton.

With Grant operating in eastern Louisiana and using the river to supply his troops, Pemberton could no longer easily interdict Grant's supply lines as he had at Holly Springs. Moreover, Union control of the Mississippi River forced Pemberton to contemplate the possibility of an amphibious assault on Vicksburg. As a result, Pemberton drastically improved Vicksburg's defenses such that, by the spring of 1863, the Confederate high command believed no naval vessel could successfully challenge them. Pemberton also fortified the northern bluff complex of Haines', Snyder's, and Drumgould's Bluffs. To the south, he fortified Warrenton and Grand Gulf. When Pemberton finished his improvements, the defenses at Vicksburg had become so formidable that only the defenses of the two capital cities, Washington, D.C. and Richmond, exceeded them.⁴⁰ Pemberton's adjutant, R. W. Memminger, assessed Pemberton's accomplishments from October 1862 through March 1863 in a report he wrote several months later. Memminger wrote, "In the campaign in North Mississippi Grant was completely out maneuvered and forced to retire to Memphis from whence he had set out; the advance of the

³⁹ Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi*, 156-190.

⁴⁰ Grabau, 12, 39, 56, 77.

enemy on Vicksburg via Chickasaw Bayou, met with disastrous defeat, and the combined naval and land attack on Fort Pemberton, Tallahatchie River, was signally repulsed”⁴¹

Thus, through the end of March, there were no complaints of Pemberton’s performance because he was winning. For the only time in his career as a general officer, Pemberton had the resources required to achieve his objectives without assistance from an external command. The result was effective execution of operational art in the defense. Although Pemberton could not choose the time of engagements, he adeptly chose their location, thus denying Grant an avenue of approach to Vicksburg. And so, for this brief moment in history, Grant and Pemberton found their roles reversed – the Mississippi papers lauded Pemberton while the northern papers called for Grant’s removal based on incompetence.⁴² Yet, despite these successes, the tide began to turn in Grant’s favor in the spring of 1863.

The River Crossing

On March 29, 1863, Grant ordered General McClernand to move to New Carthage, thus initiating a decisive stage of the Vicksburg Campaign.⁴³ Just over one-month later, at the cost of less than a thousand combat casualties, Grant crossed the Mississippi River south of Vicksburg. Crossing the Mississippi was a decisive point in the campaign and an achievement of immense importance. Grant himself wrote, “When this was effected I felt a degree of relief scarcely ever equaled since . . . all the campaigns, labors, hardships, and exposures . . . were for the accomplishment of this one object.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Memminger, 352-360.

⁴² Arnold, 56-57; Ballard, *Pemberton*, 127-129; Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 147; Catton, 368-369, 394-396.

⁴³ *O. R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part I, 46.

⁴⁴ Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters: Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant, Selected Letters 1839-1865* (New York: The Library of America, 1990) 321.

Historians' first major criticism of Pemberton's conduct during the campaign center on the seeming ease with which Grant crossed the Mississippi, and the conclusion that Pemberton should have anticipated and prevented the crossing. However, such criticism ignores the difficulties Pemberton faced. First, during Grant's maneuver in eastern Louisiana, logistical constraints meant that Pemberton needed assistance from the trans-Mississippi department to stop Grant from advancing to the river. Such coordination would have required an inter-departmental command structure; a structure that did not exist in the Confederacy. Therefore, Grant was able to maneuver with impunity. During the Union river crossing, Pemberton lacked sufficient force to cover all possible crossing sites. As a result, Grant crossed the Mississippi River at one of several undefended locations, and his forces ascended the bluffs overlooking Bruinsburg without firing a shot. Finally, at the Battle of Port Gibson, Pemberton's subordinates failed to follow orders, resulting in insufficient Confederate troop strength to prevent Grant from securing his bridgehead.

Maneuver in Eastern Louisiana

Grant began his maneuver in eastern Louisiana on March 29 and finished a month later on April 30. Critics claim that Pemberton failed to react effectively to Grant's advance, and characterize him as incompetent, oblivious, and confused. A.G. Paxton in *The Vicksburg Campaign* wrote that, "Grant's movement should not have been unknown to Pemberton."⁴⁵ Phillip Tucker in his biography of Stevens Bowen wrote, "Throughout early April, Pemberton completely ignored the movement of large numbers of Yankees in eastern Louisiana."⁴⁶ Michael Ballard in *Pemberton* argues that Pemberton "had been reduced to a state of total uncertainty."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Pemberton, *Pemberton Defender of Vicksburg*, 109.

⁴⁶ Tucker, 197.

⁴⁷ Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 140.

A series of telegraph messages sent between April 9 and April 15 by Pemberton himself seems to add credence to this view.

For example, on April 9, in response to unconfirmed reports that General McClelland was moving with a large force west of the Mississippi River, Pemberton telegraphed to Richmond, “Much doubt it.” However, in using this message to condemn Pemberton, historians leave out the subsequent sentences in which Pemberton states, “I have several regiments now near New Carthage [Louisiana]. Will inform you promptly of anything important...”⁴⁸

In another instance, on April 11, in response to Johnston’s inquiry, Pemberton telegraphed that he could send Johnston 4,000 men and, a day later, Pemberton upped the ante to 8,000 men.⁴⁹ This pledge of troops indicates that, at this point, Pemberton was unaware of the size, strength, and intent of the forces moving against him on the west side of the Mississippi. However, by April 16, two weeks before Grant crossed the Mississippi, Pemberton became aware of his miscalculation.

On April 16, Pemberton telegraphed Johnston that he could only send two brigades of the three promised, and on April 17, he requested the return of all forces he had sent Johnston based on the emerging threat Grant’s maneuver represented.⁵⁰ Therefore, rather than describing Pemberton’s behavior as befuddled or oblivious, it seems more accurate to state that he initially misjudged the situation. This should lead one to wonder why Pemberton did not recognize and react to Grant’s maneuver sooner. A contributing factor to this initial miscalculation was insufficient cavalry, which was critical to the process of gathering reliable intelligence.

The American Civil War saw, among various changes in the nature of warfare, a transformation in the role of cavalry. The traditional cavalry charge had lost its effectiveness.

⁴⁸ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part III, 730.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 734, 738.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 747, 752-753.

Instead, cavalry, used as a reconnaissance force, became an intelligence-gathering asset. Other roles for cavalry included conducting raids and security operations. Throughout the Vicksburg campaign, insufficient cavalry hampered Pemberton's efforts in these areas.

Pemberton recognized his lack of a robust cavalry force and attempted to fill this void on multiple occasions, all to no avail. For example, on March 21, Pemberton requested the return of Van Dorn's cavalry division, which Johnston had reassigned after the successful attack on Grant's depot at Holly Springs. Johnston denied this request on March 23, stating that Pemberton had what he needed most: infantry.⁵¹ On March 26, Pemberton appealed to General Buckner, commander of much of Alabama, for "much needed" cavalry assistance for their "mutual good."⁵² This appeal also yielded no results. On April 2, frustrated with these failed attempts, Pemberton skipped the chain of command and wrote directly to Jefferson Davis stating, "It is indispensable that I have more cavalry."⁵³ He repeated this request to Richmond for more cavalry on April 10.⁵⁴ Pemberton made a final plea for cavalry on April 27, as the Union cavalry operations famously known as Grierson's Raid was in progress, destroying key railroad lines and telegraph stations.⁵⁵ Pemberton's superiors, despite recognizing the damage caused by Grierson's Raid, ignored this plea, just as they had the previous ones.

Like Lee at Gettysburg, without cavalry, Pemberton was blind. One author states that, "From the day of Van Dorn's departure, the positions, numbers, and movements of Grant's various corps reached Pemberton only after long delay, often too late."⁵⁶ A strong cavalry force could have provided much needed operational clarity. For example, a cavalry force could have

⁵¹ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part III, 685-686.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 687, 691.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 709.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 731.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 791-792.

⁵⁶ Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg*, 90.

supplied information vital to accurately assessing the reports Pemberton received claiming that Grant had given up on attacking Vicksburg from the west and was moving to link up with General Rosecrans in Tennessee.⁵⁷ Hence, lack of an operational cavalry force, a problem that Pemberton tried but failed to resolve through both his military and political chains of command, was a major factor that contributed to Confederate defeat at Vicksburg.

However, even though handicapped by an insufficient cavalry force, Pemberton was still somewhat aware of Grant's movements. On April 5, men from General Bowen's Missouri division crossed the Mississippi from Grand Gulf and established operations out of Hard Times in eastern Louisiana opposite Grand Gulf.⁵⁸ On April 7, they sent back the first intelligence report indicating a significant movement of Grant's forces to the south. However, this initial report came from second hand information provided by civilians who, in the report, indicated that Grant's object was Natchez and his troop strength was 15,000.⁵⁹ True to the military maxim that "the first report is always wrong," the actual Union troop strength was only 4,200.⁶⁰ Pemberton continued to receive false or conflicting intelligence as events progressed.

On April 8, Pemberton began receiving reports that Grant was moving back to Memphis.⁶¹ Additional reports seemed to confirm this initial assessment.⁶² Therefore, it is understandable that Pemberton discounted the early reports of Grant's movements and concluded that they greatly exaggerated the size and intent of Grant's force. In fact, no one would fully understand Grant's intent until after transport ships and gunboats steamed past the Vicksburg defenses on April 17. The extremely unorthodox nature of Grant's actions explains this delay.

⁵⁷ Bearss, 86-87.

⁵⁸ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part I, 714.; Tucker, 197.

⁵⁹ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part III, 720.

⁶⁰ Bearss, 88.

⁶¹ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part III, 731.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 733.

Grant decided to move his entire field Army through swampy eastern Louisiana in order to cross the Mississippi River south of Vicksburg. This plan was so so risky that, when they learned of it, Grant's key subordinate commanders, Sherman, McPherson, and Logan all opposed it.⁶³ In fact, Sherman, Grant's most loyal and capable subordinate, went so far as to write a formal letter advocating a more traditional move.⁶⁴ This is because standard military practices supported two operational approaches to attacking Vicksburg.⁶⁵

The safest approach would have involved returning to Memphis and using it as a base of operations for another attempt at an overland campaign of some sort. Sherman recommended this course of action in his letter to Grant. Foreshadowing his future "March to the Sea," Sherman noted that northern Mississippi was "too valuable to allow them to hold and make crops."⁶⁶ Sherman wanted a line of operations from Memphis to Jackson that would ravish northern Mississippi along the way. In fact, had the political situation been different, Grant may have followed Sherman's recommendation. However, after moving the army to eastern Louisiana, Grant felt that he could not go back to Memphis. Such a move would smell of retreat and, due to political pressure, Grant feared replacement.⁶⁷

The second traditional choice available to Grant was to attempt a massed assault directly on some portion of the greater Vicksburg defenses. Snyder's Bluff served as a logical objective for such an assault in an operation much like that conducted during the Chickasaw Bayou campaign.⁶⁸ However, Grant had little reason to believe an assault on Snyder's bluff would be any more successful than Sherman's previous failed attack on Haines' Bluff. As a permutation of

⁶³ Fuller, 260.

⁶⁴ Arnold, 68.

⁶⁵ Catton, 407.

⁶⁶ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part III, 179-180.

⁶⁷ William T. Sherman with Michael Fellman, Editor. *Memoirs of W. T. Sherman* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 290.

⁶⁸ Catton, 407.

this approach, Grant could attempt an amphibious assault directly on Vicksburg.⁶⁹ With naval support from Admiral Porter's gunboats to occupy and silence Vicksburg's guns, an amphibious landing was theoretically possible.

Pemberton understood the conventional approaches to attacking Vicksburg and prepared to defend against them. However, he did not anticipate that a contingent event, the political situation in the Union, would cause Grant to violate basic military principles by moving an entire army along a single, vulnerable, thirty-seven mile line of communication through some of the swampiest terrain in Louisiana.⁷⁰ Still, despite Grant's unorthodox maneuver, by mid-April Pemberton began to understand Grant's approach. Nevertheless, he could do little about it as long as Grant operated on the west side of the Mississippi – yet he tried.

By April 7, Pemberton had some 2,000 men from General Bowen's division on the west side of the river.⁷¹ These men had been skirmishing with Grant's advance elements since early April, and launched a significant attack on his advance base on April 15.⁷² However, Pemberton's efforts to stop Grant west of the Mississippi came to an abrupt halt on April 17 when Admiral Porter ran past the guns at Vicksburg.

The presence of Union gunboats south of Vicksburg meant that any of Pemberton's troops west of the river risked severed lines of communication and bombardment by gunboat fire. Once Porter established control of the Mississippi River between Grand Gulf and Vicksburg, sustaining or retrieving a Confederate force on the opposite shore became impossible for

⁶⁹ Terrence J. Winschel, *Vicksburg: Fall of the Confederate Gibraltar* (Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 1999), 43.

⁷⁰ Arnold, 74.

⁷¹ Tucker, 200.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 203.

Pemberton.⁷³ Thus ended any hope that forces based east of the Mississippi could contest Grant's movements on the west side of the river.

Even without federal gunboats, logistical problems plagued any efforts to fight Grant west of the Mississippi. Pemberton simply could not transport or sustain a force large enough to contest Grant in eastern Louisiana. As one critic noted, "Pemberton's main difficulty was in regard to the transportation of already limited supplies."⁷⁴ In order to pose a significant threat to Grant's movements, Pemberton would have needed at least a division in eastern Louisiana.⁷⁵ However, due to Union control of the Mississippi Pemberton had few steamboats at his disposal to move troops.⁷⁶ He prioritized the few vessels he did control primarily to sustain the force around Vicksburg. To support a force on the western shore of the Mississippi, Pemberton would have had to dedicate these craft to that mission, an action Pemberton could not afford to take. These factors caused Pemberton to telegraph to General Smith, "For want of the necessary transportation, I cannot operate effectually on the west bank of the river."⁷⁷

Even with adequate transportation, it is not clear that Pemberton could have sustained a significant force operating in eastern Louisiana. Pemberton was at the limit of his logistical capabilities just in supplying Grand Gulf, a garrison of 3,000 Soldiers on the Confederate controlled eastern bluffs thirty miles from Vicksburg. In this regard, one of Bowen's Soldiers at

⁷³ Grabau, 91.

⁷⁴ Tucker, 182.

⁷⁵ Pemberton most likely would have fought a hasty defense to block Grant's advance. *FM 5-0, The Operations Process (March 2010)*, page B-16, Table B-1 identifies a 1:2.5 defender to attacker ratio as the minimum necessary to succeed in this tactical situation. A typical Confederate division at Vicksburg had a strength of 6,000-7000 men, while McPherson's XIII Corps was approximately 17,000 strong. See Bearss, *Grant Strikes a Fatal Blow*, 405. Therefore, Pemberton would require at least 6,800 men – about a division – to block McPherson's advance.

⁷⁶ Grabau, 70-71.

⁷⁷ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part I, 252.

Grand Gulf noted, “We have been living on very slim rations,” eating only “cornbread, and not enough of that.”⁷⁸

Confederate laws forbade their forces from foraging among the southern population for food and other supplies. Therefore, any significant force west of the Mississippi required resupply from a traditional base of operations; such a base would have required constant replenishment. A division of 6,000 men would require a minimum of 18,000 pounds of food per day.⁷⁹ They would also need an ample supply of ammunition, construction materials, or animal fodder. Thus, supporting a division across the Mississippi was an unrealistic endeavor for Pemberton to undertake.

It may seem that a boundary change to include parts of eastern Louisiana in Pemberton’s department would have solved Pemberton’s problem, however this is not the case. First, it should already be clear that the Mississippi was not an inviolate boundary – Pemberton had men across the river. Much more than a line on a map, the Mississippi represented a logistical boundary for the Confederacy. With the Union controlling the Mississippi, any sizeable Confederate force in eastern Louisiana had to utilize a base of operations west of the river. Likewise, forces east of the river required logistical support from within the state of Mississippi. Since the Mississippi River was a major logistical obstacle, it made eminent sense for the Confederacy to use the Mississippi as a military boundary. In fact, the boundary between Pemberton and Smith did not present the true problem – lack of an inter-departmental commander did.

Even after recognizing Grant’s movement in mid-April, Pemberton could do little to stop Grant on his own. Therefore, he requested help. Pemberton recognized the vulnerability of Grant’s LOC and wanted General Smith, commander in eastern Louisiana, to attack it. Starting

⁷⁸ Tucker, 183.

⁷⁹ Grabau, 33.

on April 17, Pemberton implored Smith to attack Grant for the mutual benefit of both.⁸⁰ On April 18, Pemberton telegraphed the trans-Mississippi commander, “Without co-operation it is impossible to oppose him [Grant].”⁸¹ Finally, on April 22 Pemberton sent his last appeal for co-operation, but as with the ones before, no action ensued. General Smith did not order his men to attack Grant in eastern Louisiana until Vicksburg was under siege. By then it was much too late.⁸²

There is little doubt that Grant’s line of communication during his initial advance to the crossing site was tenuous. The line of communication was a single, narrow, dirt road that thinned and stretched the Union column for miles. For instance, Grant’s lead division had to position men in small elements all along the road from Milliken’s Bend to protect from potential Confederate interdiction. Initially, transporting supplies along the road was so uncertain that, at times, the lead division had to send out patrols to forage for food. In fact, Union engineers built much of the road as they travelled it. Until Grant moved his supply base in May, his LOC remained extremely vulnerable to attack.⁸³

With two weeks’ notification before Grant crossed the Mississippi, General Smith had adequate time to act, had he chosen to. Conceivably, a force operating in the Louisiana swamps and bayous using small unit tactics would have presented Grant with a difficult challenge. In fact, Grant’s concern over his LOC was one of the reasons he launched multiple diversionary attacks to distract Pemberton. However, the lack of an inter-departmental commander meant no one short of Jefferson Davis could order Smith to attack. There was no unity of effort in the Confederacy and Grant’s month-long maneuver to the river crossing site proceeded largely unmolested.

⁸⁰ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part I, 252.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁸² Joseph H. Parks, T. Harry Williams, Ed., *General Edmund Kirby Smith, C.S.A* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 270.

⁸³ Grabau, 54, 65-66.

In summary, Grant began his historic movement on March 29, 1863, and some have asserted that Pemberton was unaware of Grant's action until he crossed the Mississippi in April. This assertion, however, is false. In fact, by April 7, Pemberton had received initial reports from his forces on the west side of the Mississippi River of the movement of a large contingent of Union troops. However, lack of adequate cavalry to validate this intelligence, left Pemberton in a state of uncertainty, forcing him to wait for events to unfold to gain clarity. Additionally, the unorthodox nature of Grant's maneuver further clouded the situation, and the lack of an inter-departmental command limited the potential for a Confederate response. With Grant able to operate uncontested on the west side of the Mississippi, his eventual crossing was all but assured.

Crossing the Mississippi River

In a matter of hours, on April 30, Grant crossed the Mississippi River. Using intelligence provided by an escaped slave, Grant's forces landed unopposed at Bruinsburg. A few hours later, still unopposed, they ascended the bluffs overlooking Bruinsburg, thus avoiding the threat of counterattack at the crossing site. Some of Pemberton's critics state that the failure to oppose the landing at Bruinsburg led directly to the Confederacy's loss of Vicksburg.⁸⁴

Historian Stephen E. Ambrose writes, "In retrospect, this was the crucial moment of the campaign . . . If Pemberton could have struck while Grant was thus off balance, with one foot in the water and the other on land . . . he might even have destroyed [Grant's] army."⁸⁵ This view echoes that of Pemberton's commander, Joseph Johnston who said, "The time to contend with Grant...was, of course, when he was crossing the Mississippi, before the 1st of May."⁸⁶ This line of criticism is best summed up in historian Christopher Gabel's *Staff Ride Handbook* when he

⁸⁴ Gabel, 118.

⁸⁵ Stephen E. Ambrose, "Struggle for Vicksburg," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 6 (July 1967): 15.

⁸⁶ Larry J. Daniel, "Bruinsburg Missed Opportunity or Postwar Rhetoric" *Civil War Journal*, Volume XXXII, no. 3, 1986: 256.

writes, “the Battle of Bruinsburg, potentially the most important of the Vicksburg campaign, never took place.”⁸⁷ The central theme of these criticisms is that Pemberton missed a key opportunity. Operational reality does not support this interpretation.

Grant originally intended to strike at either Warrenton or Grand Gulf.⁸⁸ Despite criticism that Pemberton was confused and oblivious, it is clear from official communications that Pemberton correctly discerned Grant’s intentions. In a telegram dated April 23, Pemberton tells his subordinate at Vicksburg, General Stevenson, to ready his forces for a movement to either Warrenton or Grand Gulf.⁸⁹ This corresponds exactly with Grant’s original intentions. It was not until failure at the Battle of Grand Gulf on April 29 that Grant’s plan changed.⁹⁰

Since even Grant did not know until April 29 that he would cross at Bruinsburg, it is unreasonable to expect Pemberton to have anticipated this move and prepared a defense there. Realistically, in order to be sure of engaging Grant at the landing site, Pemberton would have needed either to defend every possible landing location on the Mississippi’s east bank, or to move a defending force rapidly from some central location to the landing site. Insufficient troop strength prevented the first option, while a lack of cavalry precluded the second option since rapid movement to establish an effective defense would have required substantial reconnaissance assets. However, even if Pemberton had been able to deploy men to the crossing site, he would have had to contend with the firepower of Admiral Porter’s gunboats.

Pemberton did not have sufficient troop strength to defend every possible crossing site. During the Vicksburg campaign, Union strength approached 115,000 men under the commands of Generals Ulysses Grant and Nathaniel Banks. Grant’s army, by far the larger of the two forces,

⁸⁷ Gabel, 118.

⁸⁸ Arnold, 63.

⁸⁹ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part III, 780.

⁹⁰ Grabau, 144-145.

numbered about 97,000.⁹¹ However, Grant's field force consisted of about 51,000 men organized into three corps.⁹² Banks' field force consisted of approximately 17,000 infantrymen.⁹³

Against this force, Pemberton had approximately 50,000 men.⁹⁴ With his much smaller force, Pemberton had to defend all of Mississippi, some 48,000 square miles. This included a 200-mile front along the east bank of the Mississippi River that ran from Fort Pemberton to Port Hudson as well as a 200-mile northern front along the Mississippi-Tennessee border.⁹⁵ To make the situation more difficult, the Vicksburg forces drew heavily from the northern Mississippi delta region for food.⁹⁶ This region was well within Union striking distance. Finally, Union control of the Mississippi River gave Union forces a significant mobility advantage over the Confederates, compounded by Pemberton's lack of cavalry, making Union movement along the river not only fast but also difficult to detect.

Outnumbered two to one, as Grant approached the river crossing site, Pemberton arrayed his forces. A 4,500-man cavalry-heavy force guarded northern Mississippi against agricultural raids and warned of any major Union movements into Mississippi from the north. Generals Forney and Smith, with 10,000 men, defended Vicksburg and Vicksburg's northern flank, including the bluff complex comprising Haynes', Snyder's, and Drumgould's bluffs. General Stevenson's 10,000-man division defended southern Vicksburg to include Warrenton and stood poised to reinforce either north or south as required. General Bowen defended Vicksburg's southern flank at Grand Gulf with his vaunted 4,500-man Missouri division. Far to the south,

⁹¹ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part III, 249; Fuller, 260.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 249; Gabel, 11.

⁹³ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part III, 104.

⁹⁴ There are various estimates for the forces under Pemberton's command. However, the *O.R.*, Vol III, 702 reports approximately 48,800 men present for duty on March 31, 1863. To this number, in *Ninety-Eight Days* on page 102-103, Grabau adds approximately 1500 state militia not included in the official numbers. Martin in *The Vicksburg Campaign* on page 100 assesses Pemberton's strength at 50,000.

⁹⁵ Martin, 100.

⁹⁶ Grabau, 36.

11,000 men under General Gardner defended the strategic position of Port Hudson against General Banks' 17,000 Union troops. In the interior of the state, Loring's 6,000-man division and Buford's 4,000-man independent brigade defended key nodes against a cavalry raid led by Colonel Benjamin Grierson.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ *O.R.*, 702, 705.



Figure 3 – The Situation on April 29⁹⁸

As Grant prepared to cross the Mississippi, he had to keep Pemberton's forces fixed. A way to do this was to threaten Pemberton's food supply. Pemberton relied on the Mississippi

⁹⁸ U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Geological Survey, "The National Atlas of the United States of America" http://nationalatlas.gov/printable/images/pdf/reference/pagegen_ms.pdf (accessed April 10, 2012)

delta region for a significant portion of his sustenance.⁹⁹ The delta region was one of the richest agricultural regions in the Mississippi valley. In particular, Grant knew that the plantations along Deer Creek just southeast of Greenville were a major source of food for the Confederate forces at Vicksburg.¹⁰⁰ Threatening these plantations and the Mississippi delta would force Pemberton to respond. Grant chose General Steele's division from Sherman's corps to put this plan into action. Steele had the mission to raid along Deer Creek destroying all agricultural production.

Quick to the task, on April 2 Steele moved from Young's Point to Greenville and on April 4 he began his raid. No significant force opposed him until April 8, which allowed Steele to destroy the agricultural production along much of Deer Creek.¹⁰¹ Left unopposed, Steele would have continued to destroy Confederate crops until Pemberton's food situation was dire. This forced Pemberton to respond, so he sent a reinforced brigade under General Stephen Lee to oppose Steele. Lee's brigade matched the strength of Steele's, and forced Steele to retreat to Greenville, where he arrived on April 10. Steele remained at Greenville until April 24 since his presence there posed a real and credible threat that Pemberton could not ignore.¹⁰²

Grant ordered many other spoiling attacks like Steele's raid in northern Mississippi. With control of the rail that ran from Memphis to Corinth, Union forces possessed the freedom of action they needed to conduct offensive operations at will against Confederate forces between the Tallahatchie River and the Tennessee border.¹⁰³ Given Grant's large troop concentration in eastern Louisiana, Pemberton knew he must keep the bulk of his forces concentrated opposite Grants, and deal with the threat to northern Mississippi using economy of force. Cavalry units possessed the requisite mobility to respond rapidly and effectively to activity along the 200-mile

⁹⁹ Grabau, 63.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰² Ibid., 87.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 58-59.

northern front – an area only a much larger infantry force could defend. Therefore, Pemberton allocated approximately 4,500 cavalry to this mission, using his limited resources effectively but at the cost of committing almost all of his cavalry force away from the main effort.

The cavalry, split between Generals Chalmers and Ruggles, faced off against General Hurlburt's 25,000 man XVI Corps.¹⁰⁴ Though rear area duties occupied much of Hurlburt's corps, it included a cavalry division that he employed in near-constant offensive operations. It worried Pemberton to use all his cavalry as a picket line, but he had little choice.¹⁰⁵ Not only would it have taken a much larger infantry force to defend the frontier due to their relative lack of mobility; Pemberton also needed all of his infantry at critical positions around Vicksburg. Further, stripping northern Mississippi of its cavalry force would have opened up Confederate agricultural production centers and railroad lines of communication to devastation.¹⁰⁶ By this stage of the campaign, Pemberton's lack of cavalry forces presented a significant challenge to his campaign to defend Vicksburg.

Ultimately, to take Vicksburg, Grant would need a supply base on the east side of the Mississippi. The bluff complex north of Vicksburg could provide such a supply base. Grant had previously attempted to seize Haines' bluff and only Sherman's defeat at Chickasaw Bayou prevented him from doing so. As a result, Pemberton knew he had to maintain a presence on the bluffs. Forney's 4,000-man division fulfilled this role. Had they been absent during Sherman's feint on Drumgould's bluff, it is likely Sherman would have exercised his typical initiative and seized the bluff, thus obviating the need for a river crossing south of Vicksburg.

As Grant prepared to cross the Mississippi, Pemberton had little choice but to retain a division of 6,000-men under General Smith in Vicksburg. His South Carolina experiences had

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 102.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 103.

taught him the political necessity of keeping good relations with the citizens and politicians of the state. Stripping Vicksburg of all its defenders would likely have precipitated a public outcry reminiscent of the one evoked after his Charleston comments in South Carolina. Further, since Pemberton could not know exactly where Grant would cross, he had to keep a force in Vicksburg. Conceivably, the goal of Grant's maneuvers might be to weaken the Vicksburg defenses in order to facilitate a direct amphibious assault against the garrison. Smith's division would "prevent a coup de main, should it be attempted against Vicksburg."¹⁰⁷

Warrenton, about seven miles south of Vicksburg, offered another potential crossing site for Grant. To defend it, Pemberton placed a 2,500-man brigade from Stevenson's 10,000-man division at Warrenton. Pemberton had other uses for the remainder of the division. Warrenton rests about twenty miles, approximately a day's march for a dismounted force, from the northernmost bluffs.¹⁰⁸ The combined forces positioned at the bluffs, Vicksburg, and Warrenton could likely hold against a Union assault for a day, but then they would need reinforcements. The remainder of Smith's division, centrally located in southern Vicksburg, would provide reinforcement against a Union attack if necessary.

In March, Pemberton had recognized the vulnerability of Grand Gulf, about thirty miles to the south of Vicksburg, to amphibious assault. Therefore, he ordered General Bowen to fortify and defend the position with his division of approximately 4,500 Soldiers. Farther to the south, General Gardner with 11,000 men held Port Hudson against General Bank's 17,000 strong Army of the Gulf.¹⁰⁹ Port Hudson's strategic importance rivaled that of Vicksburg since, as historian Warren Grabau argues, the fall of one would inevitably lead to the fall of the other.¹¹⁰ However,

¹⁰⁷ Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg*, 111.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰⁹ Fuller, 261.

¹¹⁰ Grabau, 55.

General Banks appeared disinclined to attack Port Hudson directly, preferring instead to focus on Confederate forces west of the Mississippi.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, since Grant could easily turn south instead of north after crossing the Mississippi, Pemberton prudently left Port Hudson with sufficient strength to withstand an attack.

On April 17, nearly two weeks before his crossing, Grant launched the most successful diversionary attack of the campaign – Grierson’s raid. Pemberton would ultimately commit about 10,000 men to stop this 1,700 man raiding force. While most historians of the campaign describe Pemberton’s response as an overreaction, the situation at the time demanded some action. Grierson and his cavalry force penetrated deep into central Mississippi, destroying vital lines of communication and interdicting much needed supplies – actions he showed no intention of halting until forced. Pemberton’s northern Mississippi cavalry had proven completely ineffective in stopping Grierson. Lacking Van Dorn’s cavalry division, which Johnston had ordered Pemberton to release to reinforce Johnston’s army in December 1862, Pemberton had little choice but to use infantry to secure key nodes. Had he used his infantry solely for this purpose, it would be hard to fault Pemberton.¹¹²

The rear area Grierson threatened contained only a few truly irreplaceable nodes, such as the wooden trestle bridge over the Big Black River. Pemberton’s forces could repair or bypass most segments of railroad and telegraph lines if destroyed, and they did find workarounds for much of the destruction Grierson’s raid caused. For example, a loaded train would move along the rail line until it came to a destroyed section. Then, laborers would unload it and transport contents by wagon to another train waiting on the other side of the destroyed portions. While not ideal, the line of communication still functioned. However, instead of simply defending key nodes, a brigade mission, Pemberton used Loring’s division and Buford’s independent brigade in

¹¹¹ Hewitt, 40, 101.

¹¹² Daniel, 259-260.

a fruitless attempt to encircle and capture Grierson's elusive cavalry.¹¹³ Thus, aside from his excessive commitment of troops to thwart Grierson's raid, Pemberton arrayed his forces effectively to defend against any attempt by Grant to cross the Mississippi River.

It is worth considering how Pemberton might have more effectively employed Loring's division while using only Buford's brigade to secure key nodes against Grierson's Raid. Pemberton could have committed Loring to defense of Bruinsburg. However, though not as advantageous to Grant as Bruinsburg, Grant did have several other options for crossing sites. For example, Grant originally planned to cross at Rodney, which is located ten miles from Bruinsburg. This distance meant no single infantry force could defend both Rodney and Bruinsburg if located at either crossing. Had Pemberton stationed Loring's division at Bruinsburg, Grant could have executed his original plan to cross at Rodney, achieving the same result – an unopposed assault across the river.

Alternatively, Pemberton could have placed Loring's division at a central location and used it to respond rapidly to a river crossing wherever it occurred. Given the terrain and road networks, only Port Gibson offered a feasible location from which to defend multiple sites.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, Port Gibson presented similar response time challenges as location of Loring's division at a specific crossing. Port Gibson was located ten miles from Bruinsburg and twenty miles from Rodney. In the estimation of historian Larry Daniel, infantry stationed at Port Gibson would require a minimum six-hour march to reach Bruinsburg (and, presumably, twelve hours to reach Rodney).¹¹⁵ Assessing the situation with the benefit of hindsight, by the time Loring's division arrived at the decisive point, Grant would have already ascended the bluffs.

¹¹³ Ibid., 259-260.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 265-266.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 266.

Once again, the situation makes clear the challenge posed by the loss of Van Dorn's 6,000 cavalymen. Pemberton could have used this division, or a portion of it, as a rapid reaction force. A cavalry force at Port Gibson could travel to Bruinsburg in an hour or to Rodney in two hours, and conduct a hasty defense until a stronger infantry element arrived from Port Gibson. Regardless, due to Pemberton's unheeded requests for cavalry reinforcements, this course of action remained unavailable to Pemberton. Therefore, since the terrain provided no suitable location to position Loring's division to oppose the various landing sites available to Grant, it seems unlikely that repositioning Loring would have prevented Grant's unopposed river crossing.

Additionally, even had Pemberton correctly guessed Grant's landing site and concentrated his forces at that location, absent prepared entrenched positions and heavy artillery, it is still doubtful that he could have prevented Grant's landing. With seven ironclad gunboats south of Vicksburg, Grant had a clear advantage in firepower in vicinity of any landing site. For example, the USS Benton, a typical ironclad, mounted significant armament: two 50-pounder rifles, four 42-pounder rifles, eight 32-pounder rifles, two 9-inch smoothbore cannon, and a 12-pound howitzer.¹¹⁶ With these weapons, the USS Benton alone possessed more firepower than an artillery battalion, and it could hit targets at a range of more than a mile.¹¹⁷

Two examples from the Vicksburg campaign – the Confederate attacks on Milliken's Bend and Young's Point in June 1863– illustrate the power of gunboat support. At Milliken's bend, a Confederate force led by General Taylor, not realizing Grant had already moved his supply base to Haines' Bluff, attempted to interdict what they believed to be Grant's lines of communication in eastern Louisiana.¹¹⁸ Taylor, with a force of some 4,500 men failed to seize supply depots at either Milliken's Bend or Young's point. At Milliken's Bend, a Union brigade of

¹¹⁶ Angus Konstam, *Union River Ironclad, 1861-1865* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 37.

¹¹⁷ Gabel, 31.

¹¹⁸ Jeffrey S. Prushankin, *A Crisis in Confederate Command: Edmund Kirby Smith, Richard Taylor, and the Army of the Trans-Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 33.

1,400 untested black Soldiers faced a brigade of veteran Texans. The black troops had received such limited training that they only managed one volley before the Confederates reached their position. In the vicious hand-to-hand fighting that followed, the Union forces began to fall back and it appeared the Confederates would take the position. Then the gunboats arrived, providing devastating fire support to the Union troops, enabling them to repulse the Confederate attack.¹¹⁹

At Young's point, the Confederate brigade arrived exhausted after getting lost in the surrounding thickets and briars.¹²⁰ They soon retreated after coming under fire from Union gunboats and observing the arrival of reinforcements on Union transport ships.¹²¹ Though the Union lost significantly more men in these two battles than the Confederates, the firepower and mobility advantage of the gunboat enabled them to win both battles. A Confederate officer at Vicksburg later wrote in an editorial, "We have but little fear of meeting [Grant] anywhere beyond the cover of his gunboats."¹²²

In summation, historians have repeatedly argued that Pemberton failed to anticipate Grant's crossing of the Mississippi, leading to flawed troop dispositions. These critics suggest that Pemberton could have predicted which crossing site Grant would use and massed overwhelming force there to push Grant back into the Mississippi River. Such analysis ignores operational reality as described above. Only Pemberton's excessive commitment of force to oppose Grierson's raid leaves his defensive posture open to criticism, but this mistake alone did not enable Grant to cross the Mississippi River unopposed.

Pemberton, a department commander, had to defend all of Mississippi, not just Vicksburg. Given the disposition of Union forces, Pemberton made reasonable troop allocation

¹¹⁹ Prushankin, 33; Earnest McBride, *The Battle of Milliken's Bend: The Central Role of Black Troops in the Siege of Vicksburg* (Published online at http://www.lwfaaf.net/cwrpt/emb_mb.htm, July 2000), accessed October 24, 2011.

¹²⁰ Prushankin, 35.

¹²¹ Ibid., 35.

¹²² Daniel, 266.

decisions. He had to protect the vital food supplies in northern Mississippi, and defend vital points such as Port Hudson, Haines' Bluff, Warrenton, and Vicksburg itself to prevent Grant or Banks from seizing the opportunity to achieve in one battle what took the entire Vicksburg campaign to accomplish. Once in control of these positions, the Union would not have relinquished them. Union forces had the ability to reinforce any position on the Mississippi River rapidly, which highlights the fallacy of Johnston's statement in a communique written on May 2 that, "Success will give back what was abandoned to win it."¹²³

Simply concentrating all his forces as Johnston suggested would not have enabled Pemberton to prevent Grant's landing because he could not predict where Grant would land, or position his slow-moving infantry force in a location that could reinforce the ultimate landing site quickly. Pemberton's main problem resulted from Grant's significant mobility advantage. To oppose Grant's landing, Pemberton required either a mobile force that could move rapidly to whatever landing site Grant chose, or enough infantry to position a strong force at every possible landing site. Pemberton's lack of cavalry precluded the first option. His lack of troops precluded the second.

Finally, Grant's gunboat support advantage suggests that even had Pemberton correctly guessed Grant's crossing site and defended it with a sizeable force, it would not have necessarily prevented a landing. Gunboat support could and did decisively alter the outcome of a battle during the Vicksburg campaign. Given the difficulties in preventing Grant from physically crossing the Mississippi River, Pemberton's best hope lay in containing Union forces at the landing site and preventing them from securing a bridgehead.

¹²³ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part III, 815.

The Battle of Port Gibson

To secure his bridgehead and prevent counterattack, Grant needed to control the Bayou Pierre River. This required seizing Port Gibson, a town about seven miles from Grand Gulf, which controlled the bridges spanning the Bayou Pierre. Confederate hopes of containing Grant therefore rested on retaining control of Port Gibson – an area ideal for the defense due to its deep ravines that limited an attacker to two narrow avenues of approach – the Bruinsburg and Rodney roads. At Port Gibson, a defender should theoretically have possessed the ability to defend against an attacker two to three times his strength. Yet, despite these defensive advantages, Port Gibson fell to the Union forces after only one day of fighting.¹²⁴ The victory at the Battle of Port Gibson on May 1 meant the successful completion of Grant's river crossing operation.

After the war, Johnston faulted Pemberton for failing to concentrate against Grant as ordered, citing two telegrams he sent to Pemberton as evidence. In the first, sent on May 1, Johnston wrote, "If Grant's army lands on this side of the river, the safety of Mississippi depends on defeating it. For that object, you should unite your whole force." In the second, sent on May 2, Johnston repeated this guidance: "If Grant crosses, unite all your troops to beat him. Success will give back what was abandoned to win it." Modern historians have generally agreed with Johnston, with one stating that Pemberton's "wisest course would have been to . . . mass everything he could at Grand Gulf."¹²⁵ As argued above, these historians fail to recognize that uniting the entire Confederate force would have merely amounted to a military gamble and exposed numerous key areas in Mississippi to Union offensives. Although Pemberton may have overreacted to Grierson's raid, he did so because he had to defend against cavalry with less mobile infantry troops. He attempted to correct this fault before Grant landed on April 30. In fact,

¹²⁴ Arnold, 101-118.

¹²⁵ Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 142; O.R., Series I, Volume 24, Pt. III, 808, 815; Daniel, 256.

the primary sources demonstrate that Pemberton began to recognize the threat of an attack south of Vicksburg no later than April 23.¹²⁶ He merely lacked the forces necessary to defend against it and the threat to his rear effectively.

On April 23, Pemberton sent the following to General Stevenson, commander of the three division strong second district at Vicksburg: "I consider it essential that a communication...be made, by the shortest practicable route, to Grand Gulf." He further elaborated that, "...all troops not necessary to hold the works [at Vicksburg] should be held as a movable force, either for Warrenton or Grand Gulf." On April 28, he ordered Stevenson to "hold 5,000 men in readiness to move to Grand Gulf, and on the requisition of Brigadier-General Bowen move them." This would double the force at Grand Gulf, putting the equivalent of two divisions there. Additionally, Pemberton was arranging to send another brigade-sized force of 2,000-3,000 men from Jackson. Nevertheless, despite Pemberton's efforts, Bowen fought the battle of Port Gibson without the full complement of additional forces Pemberton intended.¹²⁷

Bowen never requested the 5,000 men from Stevenson as Pemberton ordered, for reasons that remain unclear. Perhaps he conceded to General Stevenson's unwillingness to release them. On the eve before Grant's failed attack on Grand Gulf, Stevenson telegraphed Pemberton to express his belief that Grant's operation at Grand Gulf was merely a feint intended to draw troops away from his true objective – Vicksburg. Perhaps this explains why Stevenson did not send reinforcements to Bowen until repeatedly ordered to do so by Pemberton. Even then, only about 3,000 men arrived of the 5,000 requested, due ostensibly to Stevenson misunderstanding Pemberton's directive. Additionally, both reinforcing brigades force had to force march both day and night to get to Grand Gulf and arrived completely exhausted.¹²⁸ As for the brigade-sized

¹²⁶ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part III, 780.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 780, 800; *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part I, 257.

¹²⁸ Grabau, 151, 153.

element from Jackson, it never arrived due presumably to breaks in the railroad caused by Grierson's raiders. However, the fact that General William Loring, a contentious and rebellious subordinate, commanded this force undoubtedly added to the delay.¹²⁹

While the potential effects of Pemberton's reinforcing actions on the tactical outcome of the Battle of Port Gibson remain debatable, the failure of Stevenson to send the correct amount of troops in a timely manner and the tardiness and contentiousness of Loring provide an indication of the ineffective nature of the Confederate command structure. Throughout the Vicksburg campaign, Pemberton's subordinate commanders seemed to interpret his orders as suggestions. Repeatedly, Pemberton and other senior commanders had to repeat orders multiple times or explicitly state the peremptory nature of their orders before subordinates obeyed. This resulted at Port Gibson in a force of only 8,000 Confederates facing the Union offensive, instead of the 13,000 troops Pemberton intended.

Pemberton shares the burden for failure, despite the considerations described above that most historians ignore. Pemberton kept his command post at Jackson too long, finally moving it to Vicksburg on May 2, after the Battle of Port Gibson. Once he recognized the major buildup of Union forces in eastern Louisiana, Pemberton should have seen this threat outweighed the need for presence in his district's capital city and moved to Vicksburg. At a minimum, this would have enabled Pemberton to verify personally Bowen's report of a major buildup of forces opposite Grand Gulf, and gain a direct and personal understanding of the situation. Nevertheless, even these actions would not have overcome the lack of interdepartmental coordination or adequate forces under Pemberton's command necessary to repulse Grant's offensive maneuver.

¹²⁹ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part III, 800; Bearss, 307; *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part III, 804; Daniel, 263; Tucker, 235, 238; Smith, *Compelled to Appear in Print*, 85; David Smith, "Eighteen Days in May: Confederate Command Failure at Vicksburg." *Cincinnati Civil War Round Table*, February 15, 2001, http://www.cincinnatiwrt.org/data/ccwrt_history/talks_text/smith_18_days_vicksburg.html (accessed February 18, 2012); Grabau, 302-304.

Summary

An in-depth examination of Grant's river crossing suggests that Pemberton performed in a competent manner as an operational commander, hindered primarily by factors beyond his control. Failure to stop Grant from crossing the Mississippi primarily resulted from an ineffective command structure and poor resource allocation. During Grant's movement to the crossing site, Pemberton and Smith were each asking the other for aid to no effect. Only an inter-departmental commander or intervention from the Confederate high command could have prioritized and synchronized the efforts of the two departments. During Grant's crossing of the Mississippi, only a strong defense at every crossing site or an extremely mobile force could have stopped the attacking Union forces. Lack of both infantry and cavalry prevented Pemberton from implementing either of these options. Finally, failure to obey Pemberton's orders before the Battle of Port Gibson resulted in Stevenson sending too few forces and Loring arriving too late. None of this fully absolves Pemberton from blame. Had he moved his headquarters once the Federal buildup and attack were imminent, he could have done more to prevent the ensuing miscommunication and procrastination.

Thus, examination of Pemberton's early military career and a decisive point in the Vicksburg campaign, the Mississippi River crossing, has revealed important themes. Pemberton lacked sufficient force to defend an extended front at Vicksburg. Based on his South Carolina experience, Pemberton preferred a shortened defensive line, which would concede outlying areas to the enemy. Pemberton's experience early in the Vicksburg campaign at Holly Springs led him to seek an indirect approach focused on interdicting his opponent's LOC – a capability enabled by control of a sizable cavalry force. Pemberton's thinking in this regard is clear. He wrote in his official report,

With a moderate cavalry force at my disposal, I am firmly convinced that...Grant would have been unable to maintain communications...and that the attempt to reach Jackson and Vicksburg from that base would have been as signally defeated

in May 1863, as a like attempt from another base [Holly Springs] had by the employment of cavalry been defeated in December 1862.¹³⁰

Finally, at Vicksburg the Confederate command structure did not function effectively, either up or down the chain of command. Pemberton's subordinates consistently treated his orders as suggestions while his superiors failed to understand and support his operational approach throughout the campaign.¹³¹

Grand Gulf through Champion Hill

Examination of the campaign after Port Gibson reveals that themes identified during the river crossing continue. Union seizure of Port Gibson threatened Confederate communications to Grand Gulf and made the position untenable. The confederates withdrew to the Big Black River. There, from May 2 to May 13, they prepared defensive positions until Johnston ordered Pemberton to move to Clinton.¹³² Johnston failed to understand Pemberton's operational approach.

In formulating his operational approach, Pemberton had to consider the character of his force. The Confederates at Vicksburg comprised garrison troops that had never fought together in the field as an Army. This force, designed for a defensive fight, lacked the training to engage in an offensive battle of maneuver. Therefore, particularly given his lack of cavalry, Pemberton chose an operational approach that involved forcing Grant to attack the Confederates in well-prepared defensive positions. Given the terrain and limited crossing sites, the Big Black River offered the best defensive position outside Vicksburg itself. Pemberton knew that ultimately Grant would attack in order to achieve his objective of Vicksburg. Interestingly, Johnston implicitly approved this approach, telegraphing to Pemberton on May 8, "Disposition of troops,

¹³⁰ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part I, 259.

¹³¹ Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 147.

¹³² Martin, 105-109.

so far as understood, judicious.”¹³³ As Pemberton prudently carried out his plan, he realized that Jackson was at risk.¹³⁴

The loss of Grand Gulf meant that either Grant could attack north towards Vicksburg directly or he could attack northeast towards Jackson before turning back west towards Vicksburg. Understanding that Jackson was threatened, Pemberton ordered important documents removed and began to fortify the city. Although the loss of Jackson would cripple his communications, Pemberton could still get supplies via the Yazoo River. Therefore, he thought the loss of Jackson would not necessarily lead to the loss of Vicksburg, and he considered Jackson an outlying position. Still, he hoped Grant would attack north to Vicksburg. However, Grant wanted to avoid attacking prepared defensive positions.

After initial probes revealed the strength of Pemberton’s defense immediately north of Grand Gulf, Grant decided to attack further up the Big Black River near Edwards.¹³⁵ Pemberton correctly divined Grant’s intent and moved his forces to Edwards to prepare defensive positions. In an act of brazen insubordination, General Loring initially failed to heed Pemberton’s orders to move to Edwards. Loring thought his judgment was superior to Pemberton’s and that Grant would attack across Fisher Ferry or Hall’s Ferry. Loring’s insubordination remained a problem throughout the campaign.¹³⁶

Ultimately, Grant did not attack Edwards. Confederate forces on his flanks caused Grant to change his objective from Edwards to Jackson.¹³⁷ Although Pemberton had correctly anticipated this possibility, pressure was mounting on Pemberton to do something offensive. Yet, the offensive element of Pemberton’s operational approach required cavalry to seize the initiative

¹³³ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part III, 844.

¹³⁴ Grabau, 206-207; Smith, “Eighteen Days in May.”

¹³⁵ Smith, “Eighteen Days in May.”

¹³⁶ Grabau, 208.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 240-241.

by attacking the enemy's communications, and Pemberton did not have cavalry. Without that offensive force, Pemberton remained in a reactive posture, giving him the appearance of indecisiveness and causing his army to lose confidence in him. As a result, when he received orders from Johnston to linkup at Clinton just outside of Jackson, Pemberton disobeyed and set out to attack Grant's communications with his infantry army.¹³⁸

Pemberton ignored Johnston's order because he considered it impossible to obey. Pemberton realized that, with Grant threatening Jackson, Clinton was already under Union control. In fact, if Johnston retreated from Jackson, as seemed likely, he would have to move away from Clinton, not towards it. This is exactly what happened. On May 14, unbeknownst to Pemberton, Johnston left Jackson and went to Canton, a town over 30-miles away from Clinton. Johnston did not inform Pemberton of his actions. Thus, had Pemberton obeyed orders, he would have faced an entrenched Union force without any hope of assistance after a grueling march over a narrow, muddy road. But, Pemberton did not obey Johnston, and instead, on May 14, he set out for Dillon's plantation to attack Grant.¹³⁹

Pemberton developed a simple and viable plan – sit astride Grant's line of communications in prepared defensive positions and force Grant to attack. Though Grant had "cut free" from his lines of communication, he still required significant logistic support for his army. Some of Grant's logistic convoys consisted of over 200 wagons of supplies sent from Grand Gulf to Grant's field units. An average wagon carried 3,000 pounds, with a maximum carrying capacity of 6,000 pounds. Assuming a minimum of 200 wagons carrying 3,000 pounds, Grant received nearly 300 tons of supplies in one convoy. Interdiction of this supply system would have forced Grant to respond.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Grabau, 261-263.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 249, 261-263, 266-267.

¹⁴⁰ Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 156; Grabau, 33, 211.

While Pemberton had developed a sound plan, Grant's exceptional intelligence network enabled him to anticipate it and change his course of action. Grant received a copy of the order Johnston sent to Pemberton telling him to linkup at Clinton. As a result, Grant immediately reoriented his army and began to move west in order to attack Pemberton before he could unite with Johnston. Pemberton's advance elements soon reported the change in Grant's posture and Pemberton realized he would not have time to prepare defensive positions on Grant's line of communications. Rather than fighting a meeting engagement, Pemberton abandoned his offensive action and attempted to linkup with Johnston. This meant turning the army around and going back the way they had come. However, before he could linkup with Johnston, Grant caught him and they fought the Battle of Champion Hill.¹⁴¹

The Battle of Champion Hill indicates that Pemberton was right in his decision to seek a defensive battle. During this fight, his army refused to act together as a cohesive unit. In fact, at various points, two division commanders - Generals Bowen and Loring – refused to obey orders in the middle of the battle. Historians James Arnold and Michael Ballard both suggest that Loring in particular knew he was in a position to cost Pemberton a battle and took advantage of the situation to do just that. Although in the proper position, General Stevenson and his division fought poorly, and as a result, McPherson's corps devastated them. Clearly, the Army of Mississippi was not suited for maneuver warfare.¹⁴²

Interestingly, one fateful decision had a significant impact on the outcome of the campaign, while also highlighting the ineffective command structure. Confederate President Davis ordered Johnston to go to Mississippi and take overall command of operations against Grant. Though technically Pemberton's superior, the convoluted command structure had

¹⁴¹ Grabau, 257-277.

¹⁴² Arnold, 151; Smith, *Compelled to Appear in Print*, 138; Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 163.

Pemberton reporting directly to Davis and bypassing Johnston in most instances. The result was extremely poor communication between Pemberton and Johnston. Although informed of Pemberton's approach to defend Vicksburg, Johnston never discussed it with Pemberton directly. The resulting order to move to Clinton set in motion the confusing series of events that led to the Battle of Champion Hill, for which Pemberton lacked adequate time to prepare due to Johnston's interference. A bitter Pemberton would send to Johnston, after defeat at Champion Hill, "I greatly regret that I felt compelled to make the advance beyond Big Black, which has proved so disastrous in its results."¹⁴³

One can never know what might have been were Johnston not present, but Pemberton most likely would not have stumbled into the battles at Champion Hill and the Big Black Bridge. Another historian notes that Pemberton would likely have fared better had he stuck with his original approach and defended along the Big Black River. Yet a third notes that Joe Johnston was as much a problem for Pemberton as Grant.¹⁴⁴ However, even recognizing Johnston's negative impact on the campaign, these historians still hold Pemberton primarily at fault.

The Withdrawal to Vicksburg

After Grant defeated Pemberton at Champion Hill on May 16, Pemberton's demoralized army retreated to the Big Black Bridge, where it lost another defensive battle to Union forces on May 17. Ironically, this battle occurred because Pemberton was attempting to hold the bridge so that Loring and his division could cross to the west and enter the Vicksburg garrison with the rest of the army. Unbeknownst to Pemberton, in yet another display of insubordination Loring had disobeyed orders and was moving in the opposite direction. The loss at the Big Black Bridge forced Pemberton to make his last operational decision – to retreat to Vicksburg or withdraw to

¹⁴³ O.R., Series 1, Volume XXIV, Part 3, 887; Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 166.

¹⁴⁴ Smith, "Eighteen Days in May"; Ballard, *Pemberton: A Biography*, 149; Catton, 437.

the northeast and linkup with Johnston. Pemberton chose to retreat to Vicksburg. This decision has also drawn much criticism.¹⁴⁵

Historian Archer Jones notes that Vicksburg had “little actual strategic importance” since Confederate commerce across the Mississippi River was minimal, while historian Robert Tanner calls the decision “erroneous.” Certainly, General Joe Johnston did not agree with the decision to retreat to Vicksburg. He wrote to Pemberton on May 17 that, “If Haines’ Bluff is untenable, Vicksburg is of no value and cannot be held...instead of losing both troops and place, we must if possible, save the troops.” Such criticism fails to realize the strategic importance accorded to Vicksburg and the fact that Vicksburg could have been relieved.¹⁴⁶

Vicksburg was a strategic objective because it was important to an indirect approach to defeating the Union. While little Confederate commerce flowed across the Mississippi, Confederate control of Vicksburg meant that Union commerce could not flow down it. The Mississippi River was vital for Midwestern states attempting to move goods to market. As long as the Confederacy retained control of any point along the Mississippi, they could prevent the Union from using it for commerce. Prolonged inability to use the Mississippi had prompted some Midwesterners to reevaluate their decision to stay in the Union and support the war effort.¹⁴⁷ This meant that for political reasons, the Union needed to open the Mississippi, whatever the cost. Recognizing Vicksburg’s importance, President Abraham Lincoln said, “Vicksburg is the key. The war can never be brought to a close until the key is in our pocket.”¹⁴⁸

Confederate President Jefferson Davis understood the symbolic importance of Vicksburg for the Confederacy, evidenced by his statement that, “Vicksburg is the nail head that holds the

¹⁴⁵ Smith, *Compelled to Appear in Print*, 138.

¹⁴⁶ Robert G. Tanner, *Retreat to Victory? Confederate Strategy Reconsidered* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2001), 25, 147; Smith, *Compelled to Appear in Print*, 144.

¹⁴⁷ Arnold, 42.

¹⁴⁸ Terrence J. Winschell, *Triumph & Defeat: The Vicksburg Campaign* (Campbell: Savas Publishing Company, 1999), 1-2.

South's two halves together.”¹⁴⁹ Although cross-river commerce was negligible, Vicksburg retained importance as a symbolic linkage between east and west. It was so important that even as Grant threatened Jackson, Davis telegraphed Pemberton that he must hold Vicksburg “at all costs.”¹⁵⁰ Given the strategic importance accorded to Vicksburg by senior leaders in both the Confederacy and Union, it is clear that Pemberton had a duty to retain Vicksburg as long as defeat of Union forces remained a legitimate possibility. Johnston and his army provided that possibility. Nevertheless, Johnston never made a serious effort to relieve Vicksburg.¹⁵¹

With an army of over 30,000 by June 3, Johnston sat outside of Jackson for over a month without attacking Grant. Although Johnston later claimed that he lacked sufficient men to attempt a relief, the combined armies of Pemberton and Johnston at 60,000 temporarily outnumbered Grant’s 51,000 man field army.¹⁵² In fact, fear of an attack by Johnston in his rear led Grant to attempt multiple attacks on Vicksburg that he knew had little chance of success. In support of this claim is the following statement by Grant: “With the force I then had, a short time must have enabled [Johnston] to attack me in the rear, and possible succeed in raising the siege.” Historian David Smith best summed up Johnston’s failure to make a serious attempt to relieve Vicksburg, one of the most important strategic points in the Confederacy when he wrote, “That [Pemberton’s] immediate superior, with relief forces in the field, refused to attempt any relief, is a sad commentary on the Confederate command structure.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵⁰ *O.R.*, Series I, Volume 24, Part III, 842; Martin, 108-109, 116; Smith, *Compelled to Appear in Print*, 142.

¹⁵¹ Smith, “They Didn’t Like Each Other Much.”

¹⁵² Although Grant’s field army was 51,000, he had forces securing the LOC from Grand Gulf as well as supply depots at Milliken’s Bend, Young’s Point, and Grand Gulf. After accounting for security operations, Grant likely had about 45,000 men available.

¹⁵³ Smith, “They Didn’t Like Each Other Much”; Smith, *Compelled to Appear in Print*, 142-143; Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days*, 368.

No one can answer questions of what might have been. Still, it is apparent that Pemberton's final operational decision, the decision to retreat to Vicksburg, made strategic sense. Vicksburg was a strategic objective of immense importance and Johnston had forces capable of relieving a siege. It is easy to imagine that, had Johnston actually attacked, he and Pemberton, working together, could have split Grant's forces in half and attempted to defeat each in detail. Of course, one will never know the results of such an effort since Johnston never tried to relieve Vicksburg.

Conclusion

One historian wrote that, "The Confederacy had few generals unluckier than John Pemberton."¹⁵⁴ This is far different than saying the Confederacy had few generals more incompetent than John Pemberton. In fact, Pemberton's past indicates he understood how to conduct an operational defense. At South Carolina, he learned from Robert E. Lee the importance of establishing tight, defensible lines. Plans Pemberton set in motion in South Carolina would keep Charleston in Confederate hands long after such outer works as Fort Sumter had fallen. Pemberton brought his knowledge of the defense to Vicksburg where he learned to use cavalry attacks against an opponent's line of communications. At Holly Springs, such an attack defeated Grant's plans to attack Vicksburg. From October 1862 through March 1863, Pemberton effectively defended Vicksburg.

When Grant switched his approach in April 1863, the Confederacy allowed him to transition unhindered. Clearly, they made a grave mistake in allowing Grant to maneuver with impunity in eastern Louisiana. He was most vulnerable when operating over a single, tenuous line of communication. An early and decisive attack on Grant's communication would likely have forced Grant back to Memphis to pursue a more conventional operational approach. Once Grant

¹⁵⁴ Catton, *Grant Moves South*, 437.

gained freedom of movement, his crossing the Mississippi River was all but assured. Pemberton tried to stop this from happening.

Although eastern Louisiana was in Kirby Smith's department, Pemberton wisely ignored departmental boundaries. At one point, he had 2,000 men operating in eastern Louisiana. Due to logistical limitations, he could not have supported many more. Ultimately, the threat of isolation after Admiral Porter ran the Vicksburg guns forced him to withdraw his men. Pemberton implored Smith to attack Grant. However, Smith only attempted to interdict Grant's communications when it was too late. Grant successfully exploited a seam between the two commands. Therefore, in order to stop Grant's movement, the Confederacy would have needed to coordinate the efforts of Pemberton and Kirby Smith. However, the Confederate command structure was not setup to facilitate this coordination. The lack of an inter-departmental commander led to Grant's largely unmolested maneuver in eastern Louisiana.

As Grant prepared to cross the river, Pemberton did not have the manpower to defend every possible crossing site. He had to defend northern Mississippi to protect his primary food source. He had to defend the bluffs north of Vicksburg to deny Grant a base of operations on the eastern shore of the Mississippi. He had to defend Vicksburg itself against potential amphibious assault. He had to defend Port Hudson to retain control of a segment of the Mississippi River. Therefore, with limited manpower available, Pemberton chose to defend the most probable crossing sites south of Vicksburg –Warrenton and Grand Gulf. Although Grant ultimately crossed at Bruinsburg, he could just as easily have crossed at Rodney, Natchez, or some other undefended location.

Of course, Pemberton is not without fault. Although his unanswered pleas for a cavalry force allowed Grierson to penetrate deep into Mississippi, Pemberton overreacted to the raid. He committed an infantry division and independent infantry brigade to protect his lines of communication and attempted to destroy Grierson. A better use of manpower would have been to protect key nodes with Buford's brigade while using Loring's division to either increase the size

of the force at Grand Gulf or to establish an operational reserve at Warrenton. However, prior to Grant's crossing, Pemberton attempted to rectify the situation.

Pemberton ordered a division-sized force of 5,000 men to Grand Gulf. However, his subordinate failed to heed his command. Instead, after repeated orders, Stevenson belatedly sent a force of about 3,000 to Grand Gulf. Additionally, Pemberton ordered a second force of about 3,000 men under General Loring to reinforce the Confederates at Grand Gulf. Perhaps due to personal animosity between the two men, Loring was slow to obey Pemberton's order and, once underway, breaks in the rail slowed his movement. The entire episode is indicative of the ineffective Confederate command structure. Throughout the campaign, subordinates, including Pemberton himself, acted as if orders, unless peremptory, were suggestions.

Thus, a detailed examination of Pemberton's military past and a decisive point in the Vicksburg campaign, Grant's river crossing to the east bank of the Mississippi River south of Vicksburg, have revealed several themes that recur throughout the campaign. First, Pemberton used an operational approach that had been successful in the past. Specifically, he wanted to establish a strong defense line anchored against a natural obstacle deep in his own territory. This would extend his opponents line of communication and leave it susceptible to interdiction by cavalry. This indirect approach was the basis of his defense in South Carolina and had worked previously at Holly Springs. However, throughout the Vicksburg campaign, Pemberton lacked the resources to make this approach work. He was chronically short of cavalry and lacked sufficient infantry to make up the difference. Additionally, the Confederate command structure was ineffective both up and down the chain of command.

These themes recurred in events following the Battle of Port Gibson. After evacuating Grand Gulf, Pemberton planned to defend from prepared positions along the Big Black River. For about two weeks, this approach worked, causing Grant to attack towards Edwards, exactly as Pemberton anticipated and prepared for. Then, the ineffective Confederate command structure intervened.

Johnston did not understand or appreciate Pemberton's operational approach. He ordered Pemberton to abandon his strong defensive line and go on the offensive. Pemberton did not obey Johnston's orders to the letter, in part because Johnston did not follow through with the actions he said he would take, but Pemberton did go on the operational offense in a manner appropriate to the situation (of which Johnston remained largely unaware). However, Pemberton understood the defensive nature of his army and thus pursued an operational offensive that consisted of a series of tactical defensive actions. In a modification of his base operational approach, Pemberton attempted to use his infantry army to interdict Grant's communications. He hoped to entrench astride Grant's communications and compel an attack on favorable terrain. However, Grant intercepted key communications and turned to meet the Army of Mississippi before they were in place, causing Pemberton to abandon his plans. As Pemberton attempted to linkup with Johnston, Grant caught him at the meeting engagement of Champion Hill. In the resulting battle, insubordination by General Loring added to the poor training of Pemberton's garrison army, possibly cost him the battle. Once again, the ineffective Confederate command structure had reared its ugly head.

With the defeat at Champion Hill and subsequent defeat at the Big Black River, Pemberton retreated into Vicksburg. Yet again, inaction by the Confederate high command led to uncoordinated action. President Davis had indicated that Pemberton should hold Vicksburg at all costs, but Johnston wanted to abandon Vicksburg, and Davis never resolved the debate. This dispute perhaps explains why Johnston never attempted to relieve Vicksburg despite the fact that his army combined with Pemberton's would have outnumbered Grant's forces.

Pemberton's surrender on July 4, 1863 ended the Vicksburg campaign. In the years that followed, Pemberton gained the reputation as the man who lost Vicksburg. However, such an assessment ignores many facts about the Vicksburg campaign. Perhaps historian David Smith most accurately sums up the reasons for failure at Vicksburg when he wrote, "That the

Confederacy failed to stop Grant at Vicksburg is not the fault of any general...but of the entire Confederate high command. They were simply not equal to the challenge at hand.”¹⁵⁵

Current military officers face similarly challenging situations today as those that Pemberton and the Confederates at Vicksburg tried to overcome. Today, just as in the American Civil War, higher headquarters sets the conditions for the conduct of operational art through task organization and resource allocation. The present joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational environment makes it even more difficult to establish effective command structures. Likewise, declining government budgets are likely in the near future to force the military to make tough decisions regarding how to allocate dwindling resources. While no historical study can reveal the correct choices to make in this regard, Vicksburg should serve as a cautionary tale for what can happen when leaders get it wrong.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, “They Didn’t Like Each Other Much.”

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